JESUS AS A SHAMANIC FIGURE: AN IMAGE IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

JESUS CHRIST AS SHAMANIC FIGURE:
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The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the concept of Jesus Christ as a shamanic figure and indicate some implications for this image in contemporary theology. The appropriateness of this image will be gaged by first examining the tradition to see if the image is congruent with Christian teaching about Jesus and secondly, by suggesting some implications for this image to address some critical issues in theology. (e.g. pluralism, ecology, inclusiveness).

To accomplish this thesis project I do the following: 1) Survey the trends in Christology following Vatican II which have produced a watershed of Christological images (e.g. inculturation). 2) Survey the effort of Christian inculturation in Africa to portray Jesus as a medicine-person (*nganga*). 3) Explore the notion of shamanism and the extent to which the Jesus of Christianity is congruent with this image. 4) Present some elements of the Christ-event which parallel shamanic themes. 5) Suggest some further implications of this Christological image for contemporary theology.

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This thesis is dedicated Thomas M. Martin, my department chair who died during the course of this research; and to Mark E. Dadosky, my brother, who died at age 25 two weeks before completing his master's degree in geology ("The circle is now complete!").

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INTRODUCTION

Bernard Lonergan in an essay concerning theology in its "new context" commented: "While theology has become largely empirical in its method, it has invoked a new vocabulary, new imagery, new concepts to express thoughts."[1] This "new context" directly affects contemporary Christology as he states in another essay:

> If our faith has been ever the same, still it has also regularly put forth different expressions to meet the exigencies of different times. A new age of theology brings with it new expressions no less in Christology than in other areas of belief.[2]

Such is one of the major tasks of Christology today, to articulate beliefs and present images of Jesus Christ which meet the "exigencies" of our times. This ability to present categories or expressions of Christology that are able to speak to the contemporary world constitutes what Monika Hellwig refers to as a "second level problem" in Christology.[3]

The ability to use these categories to make the Christian message meaningful to the secular world (a method of correlation), is referred to by Avery

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[1]"Theology in its New Context," in *Conversion*, ed. Walter Conn (New York: Alba House, 1978), 7.

[2]"Christology Today," *A Third Collection,* ed. F. Crowe (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 74.

[3]"Re-emergence of the Human, Critical Public Jesus," *Theological Studies* 50 (September, 1989): 477.

Dulles as a "secular-dialogic approach."[4] According to this method theologians use concepts from the secular environment as a media for articulating religious beliefs. In his article Dulles refers to the example of de Chardin's evolution Christology as an example of a contemporary theology which uses the insights of evolution to explain the salvific role of Jesus Christ.[5]

With regard to contemporary Christology, some secular-dialogic approaches invoke the use of psychology. Sebastian Moore borrowed from the insights of psychologist Alice Miller in his Christological work *Jesus: The Liberator of Desire.*[6] At the same time psychologists have produced commentaries on Jesus Christ from Jungian perspectives.[7]

The justification for using this "adaptation" approach offered by the secular-dialogic method lies in the Christian historical commitment to communicate the salvific message of Jesus Christ to all of humanity in all ages.[8] However, achieving effective adaptation is not an easy task Dulles points out:

> In order to succeed, secular-dialogic theology has to find the right path between the Scylla of an orthodoxy that adheres too closely to the conceptual patterns of the past and the Charybdis of a modernism that would submerge this distinctive Christian message

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[4]"Contemporary Approaches to Christology," *Living Light* 13 (1976): 128.

[5]Ibid., 129.

[6]R. Imbelli, reviewer, "Who is Jesus," *Church* 6 (Spring 1990): 65.

[7]See D. Miller, *Christs: Meditations on Archetypal Images in Christology* (New York: Abington Press, 1965); E. Edinger, *The Christian Archetype* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1987); G. Slusser, *From Jung to Jesus* (Atlanta: John Knox 1986).

[8]Dulles, 141.

in the contemporary *Zeitgeist*.[9]

Such is the task of this thesis, to explore the notion of Christ as shamanic figure and assess its appropriateness as an image for contemporary Christology. The biblical image of Christ as healer, while maintaining marked parallels with the notion of shamanism, has some added advantages in meeting some "exigencies" within contemporary theology. Namely, this image may provide a point of dialogue with other cultures, while at the same time presenting a more functionally inclusive image. What is more, a shamanic image of Jesus may be better suited for taking into account ecological concerns.

The first chapter is composed of two sections. The first section surveys the general trends in contemporary Christology which provide a context for articulating images of Jesus. The second part surveys the research in Africa on Christian inculturation which portrays Jesus as medicine-person (*nganga*). This survey lays the groundwork for a deeper examination of Jesus as shaman.

The second chapter will focus on the historical and biblical basis for Jesus as shamanic figure. This will be done by first examining the Hebrew prophet Elijah as a shaman-like figure and secondly by drawing on some first century Palestinian personalities which possessed shamanic characteristics. Thirdly, a focus on New Testament teachings about Jesus which places him implicitly within the context of a shamanic role will be presented.

The third chapter will draw on events from the Christ-event as a whole,

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[9]Ibid., 131-32.

and point out aspects of that event which parallel shamanic characteristics.

The final chapter will suggest some implications for this image of Jesus as shaman for addressing issues of cultural dialogue, inclusiveness and ecological concerns.

Keeping in mind what Dulles says, "a Christology for our times must take account of the horizons, needs and aspirations of our contemporaries,"[10] it is my hope, by drawing on the contemporary notion of shamanism, to present an image of Jesus as shamanic figure which, while meeting the needs of our times, remains faithful to the "content and structure of the New Testament witnesses."[11]

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[10]Ibid., 140.

[11]David Tracy, *Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 305.

CHAPTER ONE

THE CONTEXT FOR AN IMAGE OF CHRIST AS SHAMAN: CHRISTOLOGY FOLLOWING VATICAN II, PLURALITY, INCULTURATION, CHRIST AS NGANGA (AFRICAN MEDICINE-PERSON)

The "Tightrope" of Contemporary Christological Pluralism

Vatican II has brought about a watershed in contemporary Christology. It is, according to Francis Fiorenza, "in general characterized by a pluralism of theological method that was previously unknown in Catholic theology." [12] In a similar fashion Dulles notes that "Biblical theology has made us aware of the irreducible diversities among the Christologies found in the New Testament." [13] As a result, according to Elizabeth Johnson, "no one definitive image of the historical Jesus, but different configurations which focus different values and their concomitant praxis." [14] The notion of multiple "configurations" in Christology

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[12] "Christology after Vatican II," *Ecumenist* 18 (1980): 81.

[13] Dulles, 119.

[14] "Images of the Historical Jesus in Catholic Christology," *Living Light* 23 (1986): 65.

may at first seem like a contradiction in relation to classical Christology. However, Karl Rahner pointed out that the focus of Christological reflection has merely shifted:

> These neither deny nor mean to call in question what classical Christology is aiming at. The point at issue is not even to dispute the permanently normative character of classical Christology...[15]

The issue in Christology has become a matter of starting point:

> The issue revolves much more around the starting-point of theology, the categories of theological hermeneutics, and the relation between social praxis and theological theory than they do around the interpretation of Chalcedon.[16]

The result of this "shift" is a "conflicting pluralism," which provides a "distinctive mark" of our contemporary situation.[17] Hence, this pluralism of methodologies with its different starting points, renders the question of who Jesus Christ is for the Church today much more complex.

Following Vatican II there have been two major shifts in Christology which have evoked a radical pluralism. The first major shift concerns a movement in approaches "from above" (or "descending") to a movement to methods "from below" (or "ascending") Christologies.[18] There is less concentration on "descending" Christologies (which, for example, begin with the "logos" descending

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[15]"Christology Today," *Theological Investigations XVII*, trans, Margaret Kohl, (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 31.

[16]Fiorenza, 81.

[17]Tracy, 342.

[18]Hellwig, 466-68.

into the world). While there is more concentration on "ascending" Christologies (which begin from the historical situation or context and build up from there). This shift constitutes a reaction against "descending" Christologies (associated with classical approaches) which have tended towards Docetism[19] and hence, conflict with the contemporary recovery of the full humanity of Jesus.[20]

Secondly, due to contemporary biblical criticism, Christology has shifted from an "ontological" understanding of Jesus to a more "functional" understanding. Ontological emphases focus on the person of Jesus in relation to the Father (as in the Chalcedonian formula). While on the other hand functional approaches focus on Jesus' identity with regard to his roles (e.g. teacher, healer) as they are communicated in the New Testament.[21]

In the Catholic tradition approaches "from above" and "from below" as well as the "ontological" and "functional" methods are useful approaches.[22] Usually, the descending and ontological approaches coincide (as in the traditional Chalcedonian formula), while the ascending and functional approaches conjoin.[23] These configurations offer categories for understanding the person of Jesus.

The contemporary bias towards the ascending and functional approaches is

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[19]R. Fuller, *Who is This Christ?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 6.

[20]Hellwig, 466.

[21]Fuller, 8-11.

[22]Ibid., 11.

[23]Ibid., 11.

better understood in relation to Lonergan's notion of the "new context."[24] He pointed out that we have made a fundamental shift from a deductive to an inductive or empirical method in theology.[25] It follows then that the tendency in contemporary Christology focuses on methods starting "from below" as well as on functional approaches since both constitute inductive methodologies.

Christology which begins (and "ascends") from a given experiential context has been identified as "contextual theology."[26] "Contextual" means that the situation theologians find themselves immersed in becomes the starting point for their theological or Christological reflection. In short, their method entails a "creative fusion" between the text (scripture) and the situation.[27] For example, Latin American liberation theologians present Jesus Christ as liberator, an advocate for the poor and oppressed.[28] Feminist theologians[29] have called for a more inclusive image of Jesus which is a response to their own experience of oppression via patriarchy.

We are inundated by an abundance of Christologies in contemporary theology precisely because there are numerous contextual starting points. This trend has the added danger of excluding the "descending" and "ontological"

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[24]See Lonergan, "Theology in its New Context."

[25]Ibid., 6-7.

[26]P. Pope-Levison and J. Levison, *Jesus in Global Context* (Louisville: John Knox, 1992), 15.

[27]Ibid., 16.

[28]Ibid., 41.

[29]J. Clancy, "The Cosmic Christ: An Inclusive Christ," *Sisters Today* 59 (1987): 204.

approaches insofar as the contemporary bias towards methods "from below" (and functional approaches) become exclusive. In the wake of such pluralism Fiorenza insists that we cannot reduce Christology to one "philosophical-theological method."[30]

There is further a "pressing danger" regarding this radical pluralism. According to John Cobb, radical pluralism may lead to an "unqualified relativism."[31] This need not be the case, however, if we acknowledge that such diversity only underscores the rich mystery of the Christ-event:

> a profoundly positive light is cast on this pluralism when it is realized that we are dealing here with the inexhaustible riches of God's presence among us...[32]

Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that this pluralism has always been a part of the Church's history. "A fact of history," notes Donald Goergan, "is the diversity, pluraformity, or variety in the world of Christian Theology."[33] It is precisely these diverse expressions that provide "an enrichment of Christian consciousness."[34]

Following this contemporary shift to "diverse expressions" of Christology, recent studies have focused on the multiple expressions of Jesus which have risen throughout Christian history. The most noted of these studies, Jarislov Pelikan's

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[30]Fiorenza, 81.

[31]*Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 19.

[32]Johnson, 65.

[33]*Jesus of Christian History* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1992), 54.

[34]Tracy, 319.

Jesus Through the Centuries,[35] focuses on how Jesus has been perceived from the standpoint of culture throughout history. He describes this plurality of expressions as a "kaleidoscopic variety that is Christianity's most conspicuous feature."[36]

Christology and Continuity

Noting the "richness" of pluralism the question arises how we can maintain a continuity of beliefs about Jesus' "sameness" throughout history. The Church cannot live with "unlimited diversity" for this threatens to "betray and destroy the gospel."[37] Goergan's answer to this problem is that historically there are periods in the Church which call for diversity as well as periods which call for consolidation.[38] That being the case, it is safe to say that we are living in period of radical diversity. Goergan goes on to suggest that the boundaries of Catholic Christological reflection lie somewhere between Docetism and Adoptionism.[39]

"Catholic Christology while remaining faithful to the tradition, will always be in need of reconstruction in light of the ongoing history of People's human

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[35](New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982). See also G. Tavard, *Images of Christ* (Washington DC: University Press of America, 1982); A. Wessels, *Images of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 1986)

[36]Pelikan, 2.

[37]Goergan, 269.

[38]Ibid., 268.

[39]Ibid., 273.

experiences..."[40] The challenge of doing Christological reflection in such a pluralistic era entails walking the tightrope between relativism on the one hand, and the construction of "exclusivist christologies" on the other (which "paradoxically disallows the very inclusiveness disclosed in the Christ event").[41]

Vatican II and Inculturation

Vatican II brought forth a new commitment to inculturation. Karl Rahner argued that Vatican II was the formal declaration of the Church as a "World Church." That is, the Church, which had always been a "World Church" in "potency," was freed from being one of primarily "European export."[42] This meant, for instance, that attention was drawn to indigenous cultures as Vatican II was represented by "an indigenous episcopate throughout the world."[43] A commitment to inculturation meant that various cultures were given more freedom to articulate, using their own cultural accretions, their experience of the Catholic faith.

Inculturation however, was not a new phenomena which came about at Vatican II. It was rather a return to the original inculturation of the New

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[40]Goergan, 272.

[41]Tracy, 319. For purpose of this thesis, I want explore the notion of Jesus as shamanic figure as a contemporary "image" in Christology. It is not an attempt to construct a Christology per se. By concentrating in the realm of Christological images, I am able to steer away from the Scylla of narrow orthodoxy and the Charybdis of reckless modernism, thus heeding Dulles's warning.

[42]"Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 40 (1979): 717.

[43]Ibid., 718.

Testament witnesses:

> In the first century, based on the preaching of the original apostolic witnesses, fledgling Christian communities developed diverse answers to the question 'Who do you say I am?'(Mk 8:29), with correspondingly diverse images of Jesus in the context of their varied cultural and religious milieu...[44]

Within the broader context of pluralism, inculturation provides a further challenge in Christology:

> Our Christological faith has suffered from an overload of particular European religiosity. This means that everything that might be proclaimed to tribal cultures needs to be dramatically directed first at our own brand of tribalism.[45]

The question remains, how do we communicate Jesus Christ to cultures without imposing a European world view? How is Jesus Christ to be communicated to cultures where Western Christological concepts (e.g. "ho Logos") are foreign to their modes of expression?

This problem is so significant in Africa that it has been claimed that Africans do not even possess Christological concepts.[46] Instead, one trend in African Christology has been to articulate beliefs about Jesus using its own concepts which are often derived from tribal roles.[47]

One image which has shown promise views Jesus as an African medicine-

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[44]Johnson, 47.

[45]Carl R. Starkloff, S.J., "Aboriginal Cultures and the Christ," *Theological Studies* 53/2 (June 1992): 288-312, quoted on 297.

[46]J. Mbiti, "Some African Concepts in Christology," *Christ in the Younger Churches*, ed. G. Vicedom, 51-62 (London: SPCK, 1972); cited in R. Moody, "African Christology," *Theological Studies* 48 (September 1987): 48.

[47]Moloney, 506.

person (*nganga* in the Bantu).[48] I will explore this image in more detail in the following section since the idea of Jesus as *nganga* provides a foundation for a deeper study of Jesus as shamanic figure.

Jesus Christ as *Nganga* (African Medicine-Person)

The issues connected with inculturation have contributed to the "christological crisis"[49] in Africa. Matthew Schoffeleers, while admitting that there is no consensus on a "suitable African paradigm for Christ," states:

> ...there exists at least one christological paradigm which is made use of over large areas of sub-Saharan Africa. The paradigm referred to is that of medicine-person.[50]

Similarly, Kofi Appiah-Kubi, an African theologian, states that "Jesus Christ is thus conceived by many African Christians as the great physician, healer and victor over worldly powers *par excellence*."[51]

Several years ago this notion of Christ as medicine-person or *nganga*, Schoffeleers points out, may have sounded "blasphemous" to missionaries. This is precisely because the *nganga* was often viewed as the missionaries' main

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[48]Ibid., 508-509.

[49]Matthew Schoffeleers, "Folk Christology in Africa: The Dialectics of the Nganga Paradigm," *J. of Religion in Africa* 19 (1989): 157.

[50]Ibid., 157-58.

[51]"Jesus Christ--some Christological Aspects From African Perspectives," in *African and Asian Contributions to Contemporary Theology*, ed. J. Mbiti (Bossey: World Council of Churches, 1977), 51-65 on 62.

antagonists.[52] However, when one views the importance of the *nganga* role in particular African societies, it is easy to see how this parallels with the Christian emphasis of the importance of Christ. It is these *nganga* figures, according to Schoffeleers, which serve as the "kingpins of African communities and as persons whose scope of activity embraces more or less everything affecting an individual or his family."[53] Likewise, African theologian Cece Kolie refers to the *nganga* figures as the "pillars of social life."[54]

In the Congolese society the *nganga* role holds such significance, as Buana-Kibongi points out, that without them the "political, social and even juridical authority is in danger of crumbling."[55] Indeed the missionaries profited from the importance of this tribal figure. When the traditional *nganga* role of the Congolese society collapsed, the gap was partially filled by Christian missionaries. Hence, missionaries were often referred to as *ngang'a Nzambi* (God's priest). Buana-Kibongi further notes that the Catholic priest was especially ascribed the role of *nganga* with regard to his ability to perform exorcisms.[56] Schoffeleers states that the practice of the priestly acculturation of the *nganga* role goes back as far as the seventeenth century. It was then that the Capuchin monks referred

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[52]"Christ as Medicine-Man and Medicine-Man as Christ," *Man and Life* 8 (Jan-June, 1982): 13-14.

[53]"Nganga Paradigm," 160.

[54]"Jesus as Healer?," in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. R. Schreiter (NY: Orbis, 1991), 132.

[55]"Priesthood," in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Dickson and Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 52.

[56]Ibid., 51-53.

to themselves as *nganga* figures, a practice initiated by the Africans themselves.[57]

History of Christian/Nganga Connections

Schoffeleers[58] notes the first instance of the Christian *nganga* connection in European scholarship was a Catholic priest from Tanzania. He submitted a doctoral dissertation in Rome during the 1960s which suggested that Catholic priests should become apprentices to the African *nganga*. The purpose of this was to better understand the approach Africans take to healing and witchcraft. However, the deeper motivation was to eventually "eradicate" African belief in witchcraft.

In 1969 Buana-Kibongi (cited above), a Protestant theologian, made the first explicit connection between Christ and the *nganga* role.[59] He began by comparing the role of the High Priest in the Old Testament to that of the *nganga*. Just as the role of the High Priest is to serve as mediator between God and humankind, so the *nganga's* role is to mediate between the spirit world and the human world for Buana-Kibongi. The exception is that the *nganga* is limited to communicating with the spirits of the dead while the High Priest communicates with God.

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[57]"Nganga Paradigm," 166.

[58]"Christ as Medicine-Man," 14.

[59]Buana-Kibongi, 53-54.

Buana-Kibongi continues to illustrate that in the New Testament Christ is considered the "High Priest of the New Covenant."[60] In this manner Christ serves as mediator between God and humankind paralleling the mediatorial role of the *nganga*. This connection of Christ as mediator allows the Congolese to express ideas of salvation:

> *Nganga* is certainly the savior or the liberator of *Muntu* ["common person" in the Bantu]. *Nganga* has undoubtedly contributed to the maintenance of the idea of salvation or deliverance. The desire for salvation or deliverance is fully satisfied by the Son of God, The Savior and Lord of the World.[61]

In Africa today a significant inculturation attempt to teach Jesus as *nganga* has taken place within the African Independent Churches (A.I.C). These Churches emerged as a reaction against Protestant and Catholic evangelization attempts. With nearly ten thousand A.I.C.'s in Africa today, their popularity is attributed to the fact that they offer their members more freedom to express culture and beliefs.[62]

Healing is a primary focus for the A.I.C.'s.[63] Likewise the Christology arising from these "banana-roots"[64] churches is that of Jesus Christ as Healer.

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[60]Ibid., 53.

[61]Ibid., 54 [brackets added].

[62]Schoffeleers, "Christ as Medicine-Man," 20-22; Kolie, 143.

[63]Schoffeleers, "Christ as Medicine-Man," 21; see G. C. Oosthuuizen et. al., eds. *Afro-Christian Religion and Healing in South African Independent Churches* (UK: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989).

[64]This term used by Shorter to describe ascending Christologies, "Functional Christology," 134.

This focus on Jesus' functional role parallels that of African healers.[65]

Moreover, this is often expressed in church hymns, as in this pentecostal example:

Jesu sing'anga	Jesus, the medicine-man;
Halleluya, bwerani!	Halleluia, come!
Yesu sing'anga	Jesus, the medicine-man
Amachotsa ziwanda	Cures diseases.
Yesu sing'anga	Jesus, the medicine-man
Amachotsa ziwanda	Drives out evil spirits
Halleluya, bwerani!	Halleluya, come![66]

The missionary churches have been hesitant to embrace the *nganga* paradigm in Africa. This is precisely because these churches, according to Appiah-Kubi, "accept the conventional Western academic philosophical teachings about Christ."[67] This is changing however, as Catholic theologians such as Shorter, Kirwen, and de Rosny have begun to establish a relationship with the indigenous people that fosters more respect for the role of the *nganga*.[68]

Jesus Christ as *Nganga*

There are several aspects of African belief which provide links between the *nganga* role and the person of Jesus. First of all Jesus' role as Healer (physical

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[65]Kolie, 138.

[66]Schoffeleers, "Economic change and religious polarization in an African rural district," in *Malawi: An Alternative Pattern of Development*, eds. W. Beinart, et. al. (Edinburgh), 189-242 on 210; quoted in Schoffeleers, "Nganga Paradigm," 164.

[67]Appiah-Kubi, 54.

[68]Shorter presents eucharistic prayers which incorporate the notion of Jesus as Healer. See "The Eucharist as the Fundamental Sacrament of Christian Healing," *African Christian Studies* 1 (August 1985): 49-59; For religious dialogue see Michael Kirwen, *Missionary and Diviner* (NY: Orbis, 1982) and Eric de Rosny, *Healers in the Night* (NY: Orbis, 1985).

and spiritual) clearly provides a link with *the nganga*'s healing role as in the case of the African Independent Churches. However, this is not the only connection:

> it is not correct to say that Christ is likened to the nganga exclusively from the viewpoint of healing, since other aspects are drawn as well.[69]

Another aspect which Africans draw from the *nganga* is the significance of the mediator role. Jesus like the *nganga* has the capacity to "intermediate between the supernatural world and men."[70] Likewise, Pope-Levison and Levison point out that a "resonance exists between the mediators within the African community and Jesus' mediatorial role in the New Testament."[71] Hence, as with the healing role, the role of the mediator is essential to African society,[72] which further contributes to the significance of the *nganga* paradigm for Africans.

There are other themes in the Christ-event which appeal to African thought in relation to the *nganga* paradigm. Jesus' apparent foreknowledge within the Gospels parallel the *nganga's* clairvoyant abilities. Furthermore, Jesus' frequent exorcisms throughout the Gospels speak to African thought as well since the *nganga* has the power to exorcise spirits.[73]

Finally, the notion of Jesus as sufferer or "wounded healer" parallels the

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[69]Schoffeleers, "Nganga Paradigm," 164.

[70]Ibid., 164.

[71]Pope-Levison, 95.

[72]Pope-Levison, 101.

[73]Ibid., 110.

African *nganga*. Pope-Levison and Levison point out that often African healers gain their powers from their own experience of suffering.[74] While Cece Kolie, commenting on the Death of Jesus, remarks that Jesus becomes "healer and patient at once. His role of healer quickly changes to that of being one of the sick."[75] While experiencing the agony of death, Jesus like the African healer, is not only healed with the Resurrection but brings that healing to the rest of the World--Salvation.

Problems with the *Nganga* Paradigm

There have been several concerns raised against this notion of Jesus as African healer. Some of the concerns stem from the Church's reluctance to embrace the idea while other criticisms have come from African theologians themselves.

Concerning the reluctance of the Church to embrace this paradigm, some of it appears to be based on bias and some is based on an authentic fear of syncretism. Concerning bias, Appiah-Kubi referred to the Church's approach towards African beliefs as "generally negative."[76] He is correct in that the cultural term "witchdoctor," for example, implies someone who conjures up evil spirits which in turn feeds Western stereotypes. Although there is a notion of

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[74]Ibid., 111.

[75]Kolie, 132.

[76]Appiah-Kubi, 52.

witchcraft in African beliefs (i.e. there can be evil *nganga* figures) it does not represent the authentic notion of *nganga*.[77]

The locus for the Church's reluctance seems to stem primarily from two sources, the historic rivalry between the priest and the *nganga* and the syncretism which threatens the Christian message. Shorter points out that historically it was considered "scandalous"[78] that a priest would associate with an African "witchdoctor." *Nganga*-figures were often the chief rivalries and impediments to evangelization. This however is changing following the work of Kirwen and de Rosny (cited above). The present trend in the Church is to be less suspicious of the African healers.

Secondly, the Church is concerned about syncretism. It is afraid that the Christian message will be swallowed up by African culture:

> No doubt, one of the reasons for this avoidance behavior vis-a-vis the *nganga* paradigm is that it is felt to be an intrinsic part of traditional religion and therefore--in the eyes of the official church--too patently tainted with syncretistic connotations.[79]

There have indeed developed various cults in Africa which possess syncretized notions of Christianity within their own cultural framework. Among these Schoffeleers presents two: the Mbona cult of Malawai and the Bwiti cult of

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[77]See Adrian Hastings, "Emanuel Milingo as Christian Healer," in *African Medicine in the Modern World*, ed. U. Maclean and C. Fyfe (Edinburgh: Centre of African Studies, 1987), 147-71.

[78]"Functional Christology," 136.

[79]Schoffeleers, "Nganga Paradigm," 159.

Gabon.[80] Both of these cults involve ritual myths in which the protagonist (Jesus) is hunted as an innocent sacrifice.[81] From these examples one gets a glimpse of the appeal of the Christian story to Africans.

The Church has historically been concerned about such "syncretistic connotations;" however, this does not mean that the *nganga* paradigm is not legitimate. The rise of "folk christology" among various cults (as well as the African Independent Churches) underscores what a ripe image the *nganga* paradigm is for Africa. "Much of African Christianity," states Appiah-Kubi, "is mythical and mystical. Likewise, the image of Christ comes to the soul of the African Christian through mythology."[82] A Catholic embrace of the *nganga* paradigm may serve to enhance African Christological reflection while simultaneously enriching the Church as a whole.

Another concern of imaging Jesus as an African healer arises from African theologian Cece Kolie. He does not reject the notion of Jesus as Healer; rather he rejects the appropriateness of Jesus as Healer as a preaching tool in the context of starvation, oppression, etc.:

> To proclaim Jesus as the Great Healer calls for a great deal of explaining to the millions who starve in the Sahel, to victims of injustice and corruption, and to the polyparasitic afflicted of the tropical and equatorial forest![83]

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[80]For analysis and further references see Schoffeleers, "Christ as Medicine-Man," and Schoffeleers, "Nganga Paradigm."

[81]Schoffeleers, "Christ as Medicine-Man," 18.

[82]Appiah-Kubi, 55.

[83]Kolie, 128.

Kolie thinks that the inculturation of Christ into African tribal roles is an "imposition" of theology "from above" onto the African people.[84] For him this method ignores the vast oppression which various African societies experience.

Kolie's point is well taken, however, he does not take into account that the origin of the *nganga* paradigm did not come from Europe, but developed from the "banana-roots." It is an attempt, initiated by Africans themselves.

What is more, Kolie is correct that the image of Jesus as Healer may seem deceptive in the context of oppression. The notion of "contextual theology" posits individual communities with the right to articulate their own ideas about Jesus rooted in their experience. In the case of Kolie's concerns, the image of Jesus as Liberator might be more appropriate.

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[84]Ibid., 142.

Conclusion

Given the plurality in contemporary Christology, it is not necessary or appropriate to settle exclusively on one image of Jesus. That reduces the vast richness of the Christ-event. With regard to African Christology, titles such as "Mediator, Redeemer, Savior, Liberator, Healer are pregnant with meaning..." for Africans.[85] It is specifically the *nganga* paradigm, that supplies, according to Raymond Moloney, "not only an Image for preaching but a particular praxis as well."[86]

This chapter has surveyed the context of contemporary Christology providing a foundation for exploring in more depth the notion of Jesus as shamanic figure. I have noted that plurality is a "given" in our contemporary Christological context. This in turn allows for various images of Jesus which speak to the specific "exigencies" from various contextual starting points. Inculturation has heightened contemporary Christological reflection emphasizing that not all cultures use the same concepts to communicate ideas. African Christian inculturation attempts have focused on tribal roles, specifically Christ as *nganga*, as one possible solution to their Christological crisis.

In the next chapter I will explore the historical foundation for Jesus as *nganga* or shaman, not so much for its inculturation implications, but rather its ability to address concerns of a wider global context.

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[85]Appiah-Kubi, 64.

[86]Moloney, 509.

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR A SHAMANIC IMAGE OF JESUS CHRIST

Introduction

Apart from African Christian inculturation attempts which picture Jesus Christ as an African *nganga*, the connections between Christianity and shamanism have been scarce.[1] Mircea Eliade made reference to such a connection *en passant* in his classic text *Shamanism*.[2] While defining shamanism, Eliade claims that, "a comparison at once comes to mind--that of monks, mystics, and saints within Christian Churches." He cautions however not to "push the comparison" too far considering what he calls Christianity's recent "state of affairs."[3]

Recent authors have been more receptive to the connections between Christianity and shamanism. Morton Kelsey, referring to the ministry of Jesus, comments: "We find that his life and acts, his teaching and practice, are rather akin to shamanism based on

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[1]According to the definition shamanism that I will present, I will assume that the notion of an African *nganga* is equivalent to that of a shaman.

[2](NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 8.

[3]Ibid., 8; Eliade does not specify the reasons for his hesitancy. The first printing of his work was printed in French, in 1951. Perhaps he is referring to Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Humani Generis* (1950) which condemned "adventuresome" theology. Be that as it may, the context of post-Vatican II theology with its emphasis on inculturation renders such a connection more appropriate.

an intimate relationship with a loving god."[4] "In fact," continues Kelsey, "an important study might be made comparing the ministry of Jesus with that of shamanism."[5]

In short, that is the purpose of this chapter: to compare the ministry and person of Jesus with that of a shaman. Exploring the history of Christianity (including some prophets of ancient Israel and first-century Palestinian figures) one finds that the shamanic personality existed implicitly as an "ecstatic personality" with a marked ability to heal. It is important, therefore, before making such a comparison, to define more precisely the phenomenon of shamanism. Such a notion, because of its universality, is complex and consists of a wide range of diversity. However, it is possible to provide a general working definition for the purpose of this thesis.

Shamanism: A Working Definition

The universality of shamanism renders the notion so complex that it has been claimed that each scholar forms individual opinions of what aspects constitute a

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[4]*Psychology, Medicine, and Christian Healing* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988): 40; see also Steven Galipeau, *Transforming Body and Soul* (NY: Paulist Press, 1990); John Sanford, *Healing and Wholeness* (NY: Paulist Press, 1977).

[5]Ibid., 8.

shaman.[6] Walsh has admitted that no single definition can take into account every aspect of shamanism.[7]

The term *shaman* is a Russian articulation for an indigenous word of the Tungus people (Siberia).[8] In the Tungsic, the term refers to those people who have "mastered spirits" at will for the purpose of helping the community.[9] Harner insists that shamanism is not a religion per se, but rather it is a method which one acquires[10]. Sanford focuses more on the shaman as a "personality" and less as a method. He refers to it as a "vocation" in which shamans are called by "the spirits" to serve their individual communities.[11]

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[6]A. Hultkrantz, "Ecological and phenomenological aspects of shamanism," in *Shamanism in Siberia*, eds. V. Dioszegi and M. Hoppal (Budapest: Akadamiai Kiado, 1979): 27-58; quoted in Roger N. Walsh, *Spirit of Shamanism* (Los Angeles: Jeremy Tarcher, 1990): 8.

[7]Walsh, 12.

[8]Gould, J. and W. L. Kolb, eds. *Dictionary of the Social Sciences* (NY: Free Press, 1964): 638; The term "shaman" is not universally accepted. Mihaly Hoppal states, "In the literature dealing with the question of shamanism, there is a constant dissatisfaction with the definition of the term 'shamanism' itself, since it is applied to entirely different cultural complexes occurring within different ecological contexts, not to mention their different inner structures" ("Shamanism, an Archaic and/or Recent System of Beliefs," in Nicholson's *Shamanism*, 92). For example, the Native Americans that I have consulted reject the term "shaman" as foreign. They preferred the term "medicine-man," or "spiritual elder". However, on pain of having no concept to explain this universal phenomenon I prefer the term *shaman* (insofar as academia is concerned) since it has been widely accepted. It is worth noting that while "shaman" is the Russian derivative of an indigenous language, the term *medicine-man* is an English derivative of North American indigenous terms. Simply stated, my definition will equate the shaman with the medicine-man while trying to leave room for cross-cultural variation.

[9]Ibid., 638.

[10]M. Harner, "The Ancient Wisdom in Shamanic Cultures," in *Shamanism*, ed. Shirley Nicholson (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing, 1987), 4-5.

[11]J. Sanford, *Healing and Wholeness* (NY: Paulist Press, 1977): 63-64; see specifically chapter 4, "The Ecstatic Healer" for his treatment of the shamanic personality.

In his classic text on shamanism, Eliade attempts a definition of shamanism which he deems "least hazardous." He describes shamanism as equivalent to a *technique of ecstacy.*[12] His definition insists that shamans maintain an ecstatic state in which they enter a trance and are able to leave their body practicing ascent and descent.[13]

Eliade's definition, while being "least hazardous," can be quite restrictive. Such is the position of Hultkrantz.[14] His study of North American shamanism has lead him to categorize two types of shamanism. He distinguishes between *arctic* shamanism and *general* shamanism.[15] The former constitutes Eliade's definition while the latter is broader in scope. *General* shamanism is distinct from arctic shamanism in that "ecstacy does not function as a constantly prevailing factor."[16] This means that the shaman can operate without necessarily falling into a trance state or traveling outside of the body. The notion of general shamanism, according to Hultkrantz, while being common in other areas of the world (with "considerable variation"), includes "first and foremost" a commitment to healing.[17] Hence, shamanism "is supposed to include all activities peculiar to the medicine-man."[18]

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[12]Eliade, 4.

[13]Ibid., 5.

[14]*Belief and Worship in Native North America* (NY: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1981), 62.

[15]Ibid., 63-65.

[16]Ibid., 64.

[17]Ibid., 63-64.

[18]Ibid., 61.

Shamanic Activities

Shamanic activities include the following. First of all, the personality of shamans are such that they serve as mediators between the spirit world[19] and the natural world.[20] Like the African *nganga*, the spirit world is where shamans derive their power.[21]

With their powers shamans are able to perform physical as well as spiritual healings (exorcisms). The latter falls under the topic of what Eliade refers to as spirit possession.[22] He points out that spirit possession may involve either being possessed by "helping" spirits or actually exorcising spirits. In both cases, the shaman exhibits "control" over the "spirits."

In addition shamans may possess special powers which aid them in their healing vocation. Among these are foreknowledge and control over natural forces. Regarding foreknowledge, for example, the author of *Black Elk Speaks* tells the story of his search for Black Elk. When he finally arrived at the medicine-man's remote dwelling, Black Elk had been waiting for him. The Indian guide who had brought him to Black Elk remarked, "That was kind of funny, the way the old man seemed to know you were

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[19]The term "spirit" does necessarily imply animism; rather it may refer to how shamans interpret their experience. See Walsh, 9; See also M. Harner, 5.

[20]M. Borg, "The Historical Jesus and Unification Theology: an Appraisal and Critique," in *Christology: The Center and the Periphery*, ed. F. Flinn (NY: Paragon, 1989), 115.

[21]R. Buana-Kibongi, 50.

[22]Eliade, 5-6.

coming!"[23] As a medicine-man of his tribe, Black Elk possessed this power of foreknowledge.

Shamans may further exhibit control over natural forces. A story of a famous Navajo medicine-man Hosteen Klah tells of his ability to control weather. The story is told that while traveling with a group of people through the Arizona desert a tremendous storm erupted. The group became paralysed with fear. Klah proceeded to pray and chant while raising his arms up in the air. The storm immediately dispersed.[24] His powers afforded him control over natural forces.

Initiation. All shamans must go through some form of initiation. This experience, which may take the form of sicknesses, visions, or dreams all entail a "symbolic death."[25] Despite the variation of initiation practices, the underlying theme of these initiatory experiences involve "suffering", "death," and "resurrection."[26] "The shaman thus," as Borg states, "attains his status through suffering."[27] In this respect a shaman is a "wounded healer."[28] As with African healers, their power is enhanced through their experience of suffering.[29]

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[23]J. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (NY: Washington Square, 1972), ix-xi.

[24]F. Newcomb, *Hosteen Klah* (Norman, Okla.: Univ. of Okla. Press, 1964); quoted in Galipeau, 7.

[25]Eliade, 33.

[26]Ibid., 33.

[27]Borg, 116.

[28]Ibid., 116.

[29]Pope-Levison, 168.

In sum, my working definition of shamanism as suits the purpose of this thesis follows: Shamans are people within given societies who are called to serve their communities through a vocation to healing. Shamans draw their strength to heal from the "spirit world" via prayer and fasting. To accomplish their tasks of healing, shamans are believed to be invested with special abilities. These abilities may include control over spirits, ecstatic experiences, foreknowledge, and control over natural forces.

Using Hultkrantz's notion of *general* shamanism, while further pointing out some general characteristics of shamanism, it is possible to point out parallels arise with the life of Jesus. However, before exploring these parallels more in depth it is necessary to explore the notion of shamanism as it may have existed in first-century Palestinian Judaism. Clearly the concept of shamanism was not explicitly present in their culture. However, the shamanic "personality" was implicitly present as in the role of Elijah, for example, as well as in the first-century Jewish charismatics.

Shaman-Like Figures in Ancient Israel

Elijah

When Rabbi Yonassan Gershom, an instructor of Jewish spirituality from Minneapolis asked his mentor, Reb Zalman Schacter-Shalomi, about the possible connections between the Hebrew prophets and shamanism his mentor replied: "Get in touch with the teaching of the early prophets. Elijah and Elisha--they were our

shamans."[30] Gershom does not go into great detail about the shamanic connection of these two prophets; however, other work has been done comparing Elijah and shamanism.

Thomas Overholt[31] makes a comparison between Elijah and shamanism when he compares him to a Paiute medicine-man as well as a Siberian shaman, insofar as their miracles ("acts of power") have similar social functions. They are similar in that the "process of authorization" (which involves shamans convincing their individual communities of their power) hinges on their ability to perform great "acts of power." These "acts" (healings, miracles, etc.) "legitimize" their status as powerful spiritual personages within their communities.[32]

Elijah's personality and ministry parallels that of a shaman. Grottanelli points out that Elijah's "supernatural powers" come directly from his faith in God (i.e., spirit world).[33] Gershom sums up the shaman-like ministry of Elijah (as well as Elisha). He was:

> remembered for miracles performed in the name of YH'VH: healings, raising people from the dead, causing an axehead to float, sweetening

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[30]Y. Gershom, "Shamanism in the Jewish Tradition," in Nicholson, 181.

[31]"Seeing is Believing: The Social Setting of Prophetic Acts of Power," *J. for the Stud. of O.T.* 23 (1982): 3-31.

[32]Ibid., 11, 21.

[33]"Healers and Saviours of the Eastern Mediterranean in Pre-classical Times," in *La soteriologia dei culti*, ed. U. Bianchi and M. Vermaseren (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982), 649-70, on 657.

bitter water, and increasing the volume of food. (see II Kings, chapters 2,4, & 5)[34]

Other shaman-like features surrounded the personality of Elijah. One concerned his dress. His goatskin mantle could be rolled up and used as a magic wand.[35] This connotes a specialized tool, parallel, for example, to the shaman's drum which is used in healing rituals. Furthermore, Elijah is able to exert control over weather as in II Kings 18 when he wins a rainmaking contest against Baal.[36] These connections suggests that legitimate parallels can be made between certain prophets of Judaism[37] and the wonder worker shamans.

Jewish Charismatics

Geza Vermes examines the record of Jewish charismatics or "holy men" who were near contemporaries of Jesus.[38] These holy men who follow in the tradition of Elijah

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[34]Gershom, 181.

[35]Grottanelli, 651.

[36]Ibid., 651.

[37]The Hebrew scriptures make reference to foreknowledge, spirit possession, and ecstatic experience. In I Sam 10: 1-13, Samuel foretells Saul's possession by God: "You will meet a band of prophets coming down from the shrine with harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre playing in front of them; they will be in a prophetic frenzy. Then the spirit of the Lord will possess you, and you will be in a prophetic frenzy along with them and be turned into a different person" (I Sam. 10: 5b-6; NRSV). This prophecy is fulfilled as recorded in the same chapter: "God gave him another heart; and all these signs were fulfilled on that day...a band of prophets met him: and the spirit of God possessed him, and he fell into a prophetic frenzy along with them (9b-10; NRSV)."

[38]*Jesus the Jew* (NY: Macmillan, 1973), 69-82.

are also known as Hasidim (Devout).[39] Their "all-powerful" prayer gave them power to perform miracles. Their prayer in turn served as the source of ecstatic experience. "For a holy man, prayer is a means whereby he experiences the world beyond the ordinary world."[40] The charismatics as well, exhibited great "acts of power." "From the time of Elijah," states Vermes, "Jews believed that holy men were able to exert their will on natural phenomena."[41] These powers, of course, were always for the benefit of the community.[42]

Vermes characterized these holy men by their special relationship with God. Their intense prayer and personal beckoning of God as "abba" earned them titles within their community as "sons of God."[43] These "sons of God" underwent a kind of initiation experience in which they were confirmed by a "Heavenly Voice." Accompanying this heavenly acknowledgement of their vocation, they were granted special abilities such as control over and protection from "devils."[44]

Vermes cites two examples of these first century holy men: Honi the Circle Drawer, and Hanina ben Dosa. Honi the Circle Drawer lived in Palestine around 100

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[39]Ibid., 69,76

[40]Marcus Borg, 114.

[41]Vermes, 69.

[42]Vermes, 69.

[43]Ibid., 210-11.

[44]Ibid., 206-207.

B.C.E.[45] Like Elijah, Honi exhibited control over weather. The story is told that during a severe drought, people asked Honi to beckon for rain. He proceeded to draw a circle in the dirt and stand in the middle. Then Honi vowed to God that he would not leave until it began to rain. It began to sprinkle so he requested more rain. Then it began to storm which in turn brought a deluge. Honi prayed a third time until the rain was appropriated to the needs of his community.[46] His ability to influence God in a the form of "bargaining" reflects the shamanic notion that elicits the authority of the spirit world on behalf of the community.

The second figure, Hanina ben Dosa, who lived around 70 C.E., was cited by Vermes as having "remarkable similarities with Jesus."[47] He was known as "a man of extraordinary devotion and miraculous healing talents."[48] He was further known for his episodes of intense prayer. It was said that his prayer was so intense that when bit by a poisonous snake Hanina continued uninterrupted, while the snake died.[49]

Hanina once healed the son of a prominent leader in his community by placing his head between his knees and praying intensely. The son was healed instantly.[50]

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[45]Vermes, 69.

[46]Story paraphrased from *Mishnah Taanith* 3:8; cited in Vermes, 70.

[47]Ibid., 72.

[48]Ibid., 73.

[49]Ibid., 73.

[50]Ibid., 74.

He was further able to heal while at a separate location. The story is told that while in Galilee he was approached about a boy, who lived in Jerusalem and was fatally ill. Hanina went to his own room in Galilee and began to pray. The boy at the separate location was healed.[51] When asked how he knew that the boy had been healed Hanina replied: "If my prayer is fluent in my mouth, I know that he (the sick man) is favored; if not, I know that it (the disease) is fatal."[52]

Among other shaman-like qualities, Hanina exhibited the ability to control spirits. When confronted by the "Queen of the Demons" one night, not yielding to temptation, he banished her permanently from his community.[53] Furthermore, like Elijah and Honi, Hanina was able to control the weather. Once while he was walking home one day in the pouring rain, it is written that he was able to persuade God to make it stop raining until he returned home.[54]

Honi and Hanina follow in the tradition of Elijah, as Vermes states, "the popular image of the charismatic was inseparable from Elijah."[55] Jesus seems to be linked to

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[51]Ibid., 75.

[52]*Babylonian Talmud Berakhoth,* 34b; cited in Vermes, 75.

[53]Vermes, 76.

[54]Ibid., 76.

[55]Ibid., 76.

the same tradition of "sons of God,"[56] in that he was "identified by some of his contemporaries with the same Elijah."[57]

Shamanic Elements in the Essene Community

The Jewish holy men were not the only shaman-like personalities within this ancient community. There is some evidence that the members of the Essene communities exhibited shamanic abilities. Vermes points out that the Essenes practiced healing and exorcisms.[58] Horsley attributes to the Essenes the gift of foreknowledge, divination (finding stolen or lost objects), as well as dream interpretation.[59] Hence, some members of these communities at the very least exhibited behavior that is shaman-like.

Noting the Elijah tradition, the Jewish charismatics, and the Essene communities, it is possible to assert that the shamanic personality was at least implicitly present at the time of Jesus. With this foundation laid, the stage is set to explore the shamanic parallels in the Gospel accounts of Jesus.

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[56]This does not refer to the later Hellenistic use of "Son of God": "The earliest use of son of God in relation to Jesus derives from his activities as a miracle-worker and exorcist, and from his own consciousness of an immediate and intimate connection with the heavenly Father."; Vermes, 21.

[57]Ibid., 77.

[58]Ibid., 63.

[59]R. Horsley, "'Like one of the Prophets of Old': Two types of Popular Prophets at the Time of Jesus," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (July 1985): 440.

Shamanic Parallels in the life of Jesus of Nazareth

"Jesus of Nazareth," according to Alyward Shorter, "certainly conformed to the type of itinerant healer-exorcist of his own day in rural Palestine."[60] In Mark 8:27-28 there are some who refer to Jesus as Elijah, which appears to link him to the tradition of the Jewish charismatics (or holy men) discussed above. Jewish charismaticism can be further linked with shamanism as Borg states:

> In a broad sense, identifying the widespread religious type of whom the arctic shaman is one manifestation, it is the same as "holy men," one who is the mediator of the spiritual power to the tribe.[61]

Like the others Jesus draws his power from his intimate relationship with God. As with the Jewish holy men Jesus' use of *Abba* reflects this intimacy.[62] It also reflects his commitment to prayer.

> As Luke emphasizes, he was known as a man of prayer to his contemporaries...he withdrew to the wilderness or sought solitude to pray, sometimes continuing in prayer all night (Luke 5:16, 6:12, 9:18, 11:1), practices confirmed by the other synoptic gospels (Mark 1:35, 6:46: cf. Matt. 6:5-8).[63]

There seems to be a close connection between Jesus' prayer (reflecting his intimate relationship with God) and his power to heal. Indeed, after Jesus heals the boy of an evil spirit in Mark 9:20-29 he is asked how he did it. Mark's Jesus responds, "This

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[60]*Jesus and the Witchdoctor*, 10.

[61]Borg, 115.

[62]Borg, 113.

[63]Ibid., 114.

kind can come out only through prayer (Mk 9:29)." Likewise, when accused of casting out demons in the name of Beelzebul, Matthew's Jesus responds "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (MT 12:28). In this sense Jesus parallels a shaman in that he draws on the power of God (spirit world) in order to actualize healing. Hence, like other shamans he is a "mediator." As such, it is precisely as a mediator that the "shaman functions as a channel of both revelation and power."[64]

Jesus' Healing Ministry as Shamanic

Another clear parallel with shamanism concerns Jesus' ministry of healing. Healing was a major concern in the Gospel depictions of Jesus. Kelsey points out that approximately one-fifth of the Gospels are healing-related either explicitly or implicitly.[65] He lists 41 (71 including Gospel overlap) specific incidents throughout which involve physical or mental healings.[66]

Furthermore, his reported healings often explicitly invoked shamanic techniques. The most common technique involved is the laying on of hands (e.g. Mk. 6:5, Lk. 22:51).[67] On three occasions the Gospels record a technique in which saliva is used

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[64]Borg, 115.

[65]Kelsey, 43.

[66]Kelsey, 43; see healing chart in his book, p. 44.

[67]Kelsey, 63.

(Mk. 7:33-34, Mk. 8:23, Jn. 9:6-7).[68] In Jn. 9:6-7 Jesus makes a type of "primitive poultice out of mud mixed with his own spittle" which he uses to heal a blind man. This technique is shamanic in flavor.[69]

A third method of healing which is less common are those recorded in which people touched his cloak (Mk. 5:25-34, Mk. 6:56).[70] This method of healing has been interpreted by Shorter as shamanic insofar as "Jesus allowed healing power to pass through his clothes."[71]

Ecstatic Experience

The shamanic notion of ecstatic experience seems to be present in the Gospel accounts. The literal meaning of *ecstatic* appears to refer to a person who is "out of one's ordinary standing in the world."[72] This provides a context for trying to understand Jesus' identity.

While prayer constitutes one form of Jesus' ecstatic experience,[73] Borg has pointed out that Jesus' visions "at his baptism, during his temptation, and on other

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[68]Ibid., 63.

[69]Shorter, *Witchdoctor*, 10.

[70]Kelsey, 64.

[71]Shorter's interpretation of Mk 5: 27-34, *Witchdoctor*, 10.

[72]Borg, 114.

[73]Borg, 114.

occasions (e.g., Luke 10:17-20)," all constitute ecstatic experiences.[74] Moreover, in Mk. 10:32 Jesus' presence gives off an "aura" which frightens the apostles. In Mk. 3:21 his family tries to restrain him because he has "gone out of his mind" (NRSV). Borg points out that the Greek word in this passage means literally, he has gone "out of himself."[75] Insofar as it connotes this idea, the passage may refer to a state of ecstacy which, Borg claims, is often "mistaken of *dementia*." Hence it would parallel a shamanic trance.[76] Furthermore, regarding these passages, Borg interprets that through Jesus, the people see the "visible manifestation of the 'other world'."[77]

Control over Spirits

"Spirit control" represents another shamanic parallel to the Gospel accounts of Jesus. Luke's Jesus and the disciples exhibit control over evil spirits: "Lord in your name even the demons submit to us!" (10:17) Exorcism constitutes a large portion of Jesus' ministry. There are fourteen specific exorcisms reported throughout both the Synoptic and John's Gospels. This does not include the incidents of multiple exorcisms (e.g. Gerasene, demoniac) or those that may have taken place during the healing of the

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[74]Borg, 114.

[75]Borg, 117.

[76]Ibid., 117.

[77]Ibid., 117.

multitudes (17 total including Gospel overlaps).[78] These exorcisms portray Jesus as being a master over the spirit world.

A further less direct example of spirit control concerns Jesus being accused of casting out devils in the name of Beelzebul (Mk. 3:22). This accusation implies that the notion of "witches," (or shamans who could manipulate spirits for evil purposes) existed in first century Palestinian thought. The historical accuracy of Jesus being accused of witchcraft seems to be strengthened later by the Talmud where he is claimed to have been killed because he was a sorcerer.[79] The accusation of Jesus as sorcerer illustrates a similarity to indigenous cultures, specifically in Africa, whose worldviews often entail good and evil shamans.[80]

Other Shamanic Abilities

The Gospel accounts of Jesus communicate other aspects of his person which reflect shamanic characteristics. These regard his apparent foreknowledge as well as his ability to control weather. Regarding Jesus' foreknowledge Pope-Levison and Levison have compared him to an African *nganga*:

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[78]See table compiled by Percy Dearmer, *Body and Soul.* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1901), 137-38; listed in Kelsey, 43-45.

[79]*Sanhedrin Talmud*, 43a; cited in Kelsey, 45.

[80]Shorter, 8-9; Emmanuel Milingo, former bishop of Zambia who now works in Rome, incorporates the African belief in witches into his Christian healing ministry; see Adrian Hastings, "Emmanuel Milingo as Christian Healer," in *African Medicine in the Modern World*, Seminar Proceedings #27 (U. of Edinburgh: Centre of African Studies: 1987), 159-62.

> Jesus also shares with the healer mysterious, perhaps clairvoyant, knowledge. The healer claims to know the secrets of a person's heart and to be able to foretell the future...He (Jesus) foretells that the man at the pool of Bethsaida was handicapped for many years (John 5:6), that Lazarus was dead before Jesus reached Bethany (John 11:11), and that Judas is about to betray him (Matt. 26: 20-25). He can even predict the downfall of Jerusalem (Mark 13:1-8).[81]

With regard to control over natural forces, the Gospels attribute this power to Jesus as in the case with the "stilling of the storm" (Mk. 4:35-41; Mt. 8:23-27; Lk. 8:22-25). This miracle occurs, according to Galipeau,

> Because of his deep relationship to the inner spiritual world Jesus is able to act in the midst of a life-threatening event of nature. Jesus' action implies a close relationship between nature and the world of the spirit.[82]

Parallels with Shamanic Initiation

The most striking parallel between Jesus and shamanism concerns his Baptism (initiation). The Baptism account precedes the beginning of his ministry and foreshadows his crucifixion:

> The Gospel portraits of Jesus thus begin with him undergoing the shamanistic experience of death and resurrection.[83]

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[81]Pope-Levison, 110.

[82]Galipeau, 7.

[83]Borg, 116,

Specifically, Mark's account of the Baptism immediately follows with the temptation in the desert. This is reminiscent of the "shamanistic ordeal in the wilderness," in which "one enters the spirit world and is attacked by destructive forces."[84]

> In the wilderness, driven there by a compulsion not his own, in the place of formlessness and anomy, in the presence of wild beasts, Jesus encountered the struggle with dark forces and finally was ministered to by benevolent spirits. The text describes the experience by which one becomes a shaman in many cultures.[85]

There is however another aspect of this initiatory experience which speaks to the heart of the Christ-event--the crucifixion. The theme of sacrificial death parallels other shamanic initiatory experiences.

> The shaman's initial crisis represents the healer's passion, or, as the Akawaio Indians themselves put it, 'a man must die before he becomes a shaman.'[86]

The shaman's death (symbolic) invokes the ability to "mediate the power of the eternal." The shaman is therefore a "wounded healer."[87] In a similar fashion, "Jesus Christ," states Alyward Shorter, "is the wounded healer, the one who has proved the truth of God's love by the truth of his suffering."[88] Thus it is with "'bleeding hands' that he

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[84]Ibid., 116.

[85]Ibid., 117.

[86]I.M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (Hardmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1971), 70; quoted in Borg, 116.

[87]Borg, 116.

[88]*Jesus and the Witchdoctor*, 15.

heals."[89] The Gospel Passion accounts underscore Jesus' role as a healer, one who has suffered and is made more powerful through that suffering via resurrection.

Conclusion

All of these elements of Jesus' life communicated in the Gospel narratives contain many parallels with shamanism. The thesis of this chapter aims at presenting the historical and scriptural evidence about Jesus which coincides with that of a shaman.

The phenomenon of shamanism remains complex. Although it did not exist explicitly in first-century Palestine, the study of Jewish "holy men" shows that the shamanic personality implicitly existed. The linking of Jesus with that same tradition allows us to see that the shaman-like personality was implicitly present within his historical context.

In the next chapter I will explore specific characteristics which contain shamanic themes within the Christ-event as a whole (birth, transfiguration, etc.). I have already hinted at some of these when I referred to shamanic initiatory experiences.

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[89]Ibid., 9.

CHAPTER THREE

SHAMANIC THEMES IN THE CHRIST-EVENT

Introduction

"In ordinary textbook Christology today," questioned Karl Rahner, "what do we hear of Christ's Passion, Circumcision, Baptism, his prayer, Transfiguration, Presentation in the Temple...descent into underworld [Hell], the Ascension into heaven and so on?"[1] An examination of shamanic themes within the Christ-event sheds new light on these significant Christological events. Specifically when viewed through a shamanic lens, these events such as the Ascension, descent into Hell, and Transfiguration take on a renewed meaning. Furthermore therein lie many parallels with shamanic election and initiation themes. The purpose of this chapter is to point out parallels between certain Christological events and shamanic themes. After an analysis of such parallels, the chapter will conclude with a reflection of how Christ's uniqueness within the context of these shamanic parallels can be maintained.

The significance of such an examination is twofold. As an example of

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[1]Rahner, "Current Problems in Christology," in *Theological Investigations I*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1963): 190; [brackets mine].

correlation, it makes use of the contemporary notion of shamanism (which has implications for dialogue) while simultaneously, it may help renew an understanding of the events that Rahner mentioned, which have been ignored in contemporary Christology.

Shamanic Themes of Election and Initiation in the Christ-Event

Election

The birth narrative in Matthew's Gospel indicates that Jesus is viewed as an "elect" person within the Matthean community. The conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit (Mt. 1:18) the star of Bethlehem (Mt. 2:7), the journey of the wise men (Mt.2:9), and the slaughter of the innocents (Mt. 2:16) signify Jesus' election by the very nature of his existence. This narrative parallels other shamanic birth themes.

In some indigenous tribes the shaman's birth is believed to take place supernaturally. For example, Eliade cites a Yakut (Siberian tribe) legend in which the birth of shamans occurs via the "Bird-Mother." She gives birth to them in a large fir tree and takes care of them until they are entrusted to tutelary spirits.[2] Perhaps this legend signifies the unique role that shamans have within their community as well as their special relationship with the spirit world.

Shamanic figures must also live close to the threat of death sometimes

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[2]Eliade, 37.

"narrowly" avoiding danger:

> So it is with those who are close to the archetype of healing. They live and work close to death, and they themselves, as we shall see, are people who have felt the hot breath of death or illness, and have narrowly escaped death.[3]

Sanford uses the example of Asklepius, the Greek god of healing. After Apollo, in a jealous fury, killed his wife, he "snatched" Asklepius from her womb as she lay on a funeral pyre. Apollo then entrusted the child to Chiron for rearing. This "narrow escape from death" echoes the Matthean account of Jesus' near escape from Herod's slaughter of the first-born.

Childhood and Shamanic Election. The birth stories surrounding shamanic figures are not the only indication of their elected vocation. The shaman can show unusual gifts during childhood. "In early youth a budding shaman differs from his or her peers in certain general ways."[4] One of these ways according to Schmidt, is that they are "unusually gifted or perceptive members." Such was the case with Black Elk, a famous Lakota medicine-man.[5] He was nine years old when he had his initiatory illness and great ecstatic vision. Similarly, the Lucan account of Jesus with the teachers in the Temple occurred when he was twelve years old. This speaks of Jesus' "unusual gifts" in that "all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers (Lk. 2:47)." This signifies the elected status that

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[3]Sanford, 42-43.

[4]M. Schmidt, "Crazy Wisdom: The Shaman as Mediator of Realities," in Nicholson's *Shamanism*, 63.

[5]Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 17.

Jesus maintained in the minds of the Lucan community.

The birth narratives and short references to Jesus' childhood speak to his election as a significant figure within his community, hence paralleling shamanic themes of election. However, the Christ-event is pregnant with themes that parallel shamanic initiation.

Initiation

Temptation often coincides with initiation. Eliade refers to St. Anthony of the Desert and his experience of torture and torment. "Such temptations are equivalent to an 'initiation,' for it is through them that the saints transcend the human condition, that is, distinguish themselves from the profane masses."[6] Temptation experiences which parallel "shamanic experiences" are a constant theme in the Christian life. The Synoptics each offer a variation on the temptation accounts of Jesus (Mt. 4:1-11; Mk. 1:12-13:; Luke 4: 1-13). The Markan account is especially interesting because it immediately precedes the Baptism and affirmation (or election)[7] of Jesus as the Son of God: "The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness" (Mk. 1:12). The significance of the Temptation in the life of Jesus parallels shamanic experiences of initiation in that Jesus is being prepared for a life of service to the community. This is to be ultimately fulfilled on the Cross.

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[6]Eliade, 377.

[7]"Election" here is not meant in the Adoptionist sense but rather as it marks the beginning of his public ministry (which involves a ministry of healing).

The Transfiguration viewed as a form of ecstatic experience, parallels with shamanic notions of ecstatic initiatory experiences. Ecstatic experiences often facilitate shamanic initiation:

> Usually sicknesses, dreams, and ecstacies in themselves constitute an initiation; that is, they transform the profane, pre-"choice" individual into a technician of the sacred...for it is the ecstatic experience that radically changes the religious status of the "chosen" person.[8]

"The Bible," states Sanford, "abounds in examples of ecstacy."[9] Among these he lists Moses' experience on Mt. Sinai, Ezekiel as he was "caught up in the Spirit," as well as the Synoptic accounts of Jesus' Transfiguration experience when "his face shone like the sun, and his garments became as light" (Matt.17:2) parallel shamanic initiatory ecstatic experiences.

The Eucharistic Sacrifice contains elements which also parallel shamanic initiation. For a shaman, "(symbolic) initiatory death" often includes "dismemberment of the candidate's body."[10] An interesting example cited in Schmidt's article invites parallels with Jesus' offering himself at the Last Supper. Schmidt cites a Siberian initiatory ritual[11] in which a "fledgling shaman" is dismembered, "cut into tiny pieces" and "distributed among the spirits of sickness." The shaman is given power to heal whatever specific "spirits" eat of his body. The

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[8]Eliade, 33.

[9]Sanford, 75.

[10]Eliade, 34.

[11]Horst Nachtigall, "The Culture-Historical Origin of Shamanism," in *The Realm of the Extra-Human: Agents and Audiences*, ed. A. Bharati (Paris: Mouton Publishers, 1976); quoted in Mary Schmidt, "Shaman as Mediator," in Nicholson's *Shamanism*, 67.

fledgling shaman is then reassembled with "new flesh." "The spirits destroy and break the shaman, yet he is reborn and returns to earth with the power to heal."[12] In a sense, this example represents a form of initiation. Preceding Jesus' tortured death he offers his body for consumption (dismemberment) wherein his body will be restored via the Resurrection. This belief in the healing body of Christ has carried over to Christian liturgy. MacNutt states that "traditionally, the Eucharist has always been regarded as a sacrament bringing healing."[13] Indeed this is underscored by the words spoken in the Communion prayer: "only say the word and I shall be healed."[14]

The Passion and Resurrection parallel shamanic initiatory experiences, specifically the "final consecration" of the shaman. Eliade's thesis contends that "all the ecstatic experiences that determine the future shaman's vocation involve the traditional schema of an initiation ceremony: suffering, death, resurrection."[15] In one portion of his text he examines the initiation ceremony among the Buryat (Siberian) tribe:

> [It] involves a quite complex ecstatic experience during which the candidate is believed to be tortured, cut to pieces, put to death, and then return to life. It is only this initiatory death and resurrection that consecrates a shaman.[16]

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[12]Schmidt, 67.

[13]Francis MacNutt, *Healing* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1974), 291.

[14]Ibid., 291.

[15]Eliade, 33.

[16]Ibid., 76.

Similarly, this theme is present within the Gospel accounts of the torture and crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus. Perhaps one way to view this event is that of an initiatory ordeal in which Jesus is consecrated to the world and his healing power released through his death/resurrection.

The notions of Ascent and Descent further represent themes of shamanic initiation. When referring to the initiatory ordeal among the Siberian Yakut, Eliade points out:

> The master reveals to the novice how to recognize and cure the sicknesses that attack the various parts of the body. Each time that he names a part of the body, he spits in the disciple's mouth, and the disciple must swallow the spittle so that he may know "the roads of the evils of Hell." Finally, the shaman takes his disciple to the upper world, among the celestial spirits. The shaman henceforth possesses a "consecrated body" and can practice his profession.[17]

The descent/ascent theme is even more clear among some Australian aboriginal tribes which includes "an almost complete schema of initiation, descent to the lower regions followed by ascent to the sky, where the Supreme Being grants shamanic power."[18]

Such a theme is present in the Christ-event specifically as it is communicated in the Apostles' Creed: "He descended into Hell, on the third day he rose again. He ascended into Heaven." These images are often drained of their significance insofar as they fall victim to thoughtless repetition. However, when paralleled with the shamanic theme of initiation these images take on

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[17]Eliade, 114.

[18]Eliade, 136.

renewed meaning. What is more, the themes of ascent and descent possess meaning individually.

The notion of Ascent especially parallels the final initiation of a shaman. Concerning the reference to the Buryat initiation (cited above), ascension is a vital aspect as: "The initiation proper...consists in the candidate's triumphant journey to the sky."[19] Among another tribe, the Dyak of Borneo (Indonesia), Ascent "completes" the shaman's initiation as: "[This] includes an ecstatic journey to the sky on a ritual ladder."[20] Finally Eliade points out that, among the Australian aborigines, ascent is "especially" prominent in the "consecration" of a shaman.[21] These examples parallel the Ascension of Jesus especially as it is communicated in the Creed. The notion of Jesus' Ascension to Heaven, where he is "seated at the right hand of the Father," echoes the theme of initiation as Jesus achieves final consecration as the Son of God.

The theme of descent contains dual meaning within the shamanic experience. It occurs in the initiatory ordeal (cited above note 17) and it also comes into play as a shamanic technique of rescuing lost souls. As initiation, for example, Eliade points out that "the cave," present in many archaic cultures, is often a "concrete symbol" of a "descent to the underworld" playing a role in the

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[19]Eliade, 76.

[20]Eliade, 58.

[21]Eliade, 51.

initiation.[22]

As as shamanic technique of rescuing lost souls: "These descents to the underworld are undertaken especially to find and bring back a sick person's soul."[23] Eliade points out several mythic parallels with this shamanic theme. He cites the Orpheus myth in which Orpheus descends into Hades to rescue his wife's soul.[24] He also cites the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* wherein the "Dtom-ba Shi-lo" (shamanic figure) frees the "souls of the departed" from hell.[25] Specifically, the shaman's task is to guide the departed through the "complicated" and "dangerous precincts" of hell to the "realm of the gods." In this way the shaman "opens the road" for the release of lost souls.[26]

In the Christian tradition the notion of Jesus' descent to Hell parallels these examples of shamanic descent. As an initiation, it reflects Christs descent as part of his final consecration as the Son of God. As a shamanic technique, it parallels the Christian belief that Jesus, upon descending to Hell, freed the souls therein and opened the pathway to Heaven.

In Sum the "initiation story" represents a "well-organized variant of the *universal theme* of the death and mystical resurrection of the candidate by means of a

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[22]Eliade, 51.

[23]Eliade, 203.

[24]Eliade, 391.

[25]Eliade, 446.

[26]Ibid., 446-47.

descent to the underworld and an ascent to the sky."[27] Such a theme is not only present in the archaic and indigenous cultures but "has its place in a symbolic or ritual system well known to the history of religions."[28] If significant features of the Christ-event represent a "universal theme," the question arises of how the Christian claims of Christ's uniqueness can stand without becoming reductive. Within the context of Rahner's anthropology one can appreciate the universal or archetypal nature of these shamanic themes while still maintaining the Christian claims of Christ's uniqueness.

Universal Shamanic Themes as Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious

"The remarkable similarities among shamans from widely dispersed areas of the world," states Walsh, "raise the question of how these similarities developed."[29] He posits that these universal themes either came about by an innate predisposition or by a lengthy process of "migration and diffusion from common ancestors."[30] Either of these can further be explained within the context of the *collective unconscious*.[31] That is, if these universal themes are

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[27]Eliade, 43.

[28]Ibid., 43.

[29]Walsh, 13.

[30]Ibid., 13.

[31]Jung, concerning the collective unconscious: "...we also find in the unconscious qualities that are not individually acquired but are inherited, e.g., instincts as impulses to carry out actions from necessity, without conscious motivation. In this 'deeper' stratum we also find the...archetypes...The instincts and

innate then they constitute a part of the collective human makeup. If however, they are products of centuries of migration, they are still a part of the collective human memory.

The collective unconscious "houses" these universal themes in the form of *archetypes.* These archetypes, according to Jung, constitute those images that are "derived from the repeated observation that for instance, the myths and fairy tales of world literature contain definite motifs which crop up everywhere."[32] Perhaps the universal nature of the "initiation story" of which Eliade speaks (which includes death, resurrection, descent and ascent) is archetypal in nature because of its universality and constant recurrence cross-culturally and throughout history.

Shamanic Archetypes as Christology "From Below"?

The archetypal nature of the "initiation story" (being part of the collective unconscious), as Rahner might have it, constitutes part of our "natural soul."

> Christian archetypes are really concealed in the depths of our 'natural soul' because we are redeemed not only from above but from below by him who descended into the depths...[33]

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archetypes together form the 'collective unconscious.' I call it 'collective' because unlike the personal unconscious, it is not made up of individual and more or less unique contents but of those which are universal and of regular occurrence, "The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche," *Collected Works*, Vol. 8; quoted in C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections* (NY: Vintage Books, 1965), 401-02.

[32]"Civilization in Transition," *Collected Works* Vol. 10; quoted in C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*, 392.

[33]"A Spiritual Dialogue at Evening," *Theological Investigations III*, trans. Karl H. and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1967), 232.

Moreover, states Rahner, "Whatever may be the truth about the 'collective unconscious'...it remains true that the spirit of man draws its life *also* from this kingdom."[34] In a sense, the collective unconscious, with its rich world of archetypes, may be appropriated within the context of Rahner's anthropology. That is, the notion that our "natural soul" contains the archetypes (e.g., initiation story) which parallel so closely with the Christ-event, illustrates, from Rahner's perspective, that we are anthropologically predisposed "from below" to receiving the revelation wrought in Jesus "from above":

> Thus, it is not so strange, if we may use the word, that there is such an event as an *enfleshment or hominization of God.* For this "strangeness," as a perfect whole (that is man's openness to being), is *already present in the mystery of the primordial knowing power of each and every man.*[35]

The notion that human beings are constructed in such a way as to receive the revelation of God implies that the Christ-event may already be imprinted on the primordial human mind. Perhaps these "imprints" are archetypes. Jung defines archetypes as "pre-existent" and "part of the inherited structure of the psyche and can therefore manifest itself spontaneously anywhere, at any time."[36]

What is more, perhaps the shamanic universal nature of the "initiation story" (as it includes death, resurrection, descent, and ascent) represents one manifestation of the Christ-event already present in our "primordial knowledge."

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[34]Ibid., 231; [emphasis added]

[35]K. Rahner, *The Spiritual Exercises* (NY: Herder and Herder, 1965), 103; [emphasis added].

[36]Ibid., 392.

The fact that each society gives birth to its own shamanic figures (the Tungsic to the *saman*, the Navajo to their medicine-men/sand painters, and ancient Israel to the Jewish charismatics) seems to underscore the belief that we are predisposed, as a collective human race, to produce these healing figures in our own individual societies. Perhaps this represents our predisposition (or "Christology from below") to receiving the healing figure of Jesus as the revelation from above. For example Buana-Kibongi sees the African *nganga* as a precursor to Christ:

> *Nganga* is certainly the savior or the liberator of *Muntu* ["common person"] *Nganga* has undoubtedly contributed to the maintenance of the idea of salvation or deliverance. The desire for salvation or deliverance is fully satisfied by the Son of God, the Savior and Lord of the World.[37]

He continues:

> *Nganga* willed to save man, but did not succeed in doing so; Christ did so fully once for all. Christ has therefore accomplished the work of *Nganga*.[38]

It is no wonder, as Buana-Kibongi might have it, that there remain so many parallels between the figure of Jesus and shamanism. The latter seems to represent our human predisposition to receive the revelation wrought in the former. This seems to be the case with Buana-Kibongi, since he believes that Christ "picked up" where the *nganga* left off.

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[37]Buana-Kibongi, 54; [brackets mine].

[38]Ibid., 55.

Conclusion

The parallels between shamanic themes and the Christ-event remain plentiful especially with regard to Eliade's notion of the "initiation story." Such parallels point to the archetypal nature of shamanism as a human predisposition to produce such figures. Such a view, within the context of Rahner's anthropology, allows for an appreciation of shamanic figures historically and cross-culturally, while allowing for the Christian claims for the uniqueness of Christ.

In the final chapter I will suggest some implications for a shamanic image of Jesus in our contemporary situation. I will then address some questions that might be raised concerning this image of Jesus as shaman. Finally, I will conclude with a personal reflection.

CHAPTER FOUR

IMPLICATIONS FOR A SHAMANIC IMAGE OF JESUS CHRIST IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTOLOGY, QUESTIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

In the first chapter I laid the Christological foundation for images of Jesus that are congruent with Church tradition and simultaneously speak to the "exigencies" of our times. In the subsequent two chapters I established parallels between Jesus (the Christ-event) with shamanism. This chapter begins by addressing the question of why the image of Jesus as a shamanic figure is an appropriate image for our context. Specifically, this image may prove appropriate for addressing issues of plurality, ecology, and inclusiveness.

Secondly, this chapter will address some concerns that may arise concerning a shamanic image of Jesus. I will not address these concerns in length because I have tried to take them into account throughout this thesis. Finally, I will conclude with a personal reflection surrounding the genesis of the idea for this thesis.

Implications for a Shamanic Image of Jesus

Pluralism and Dialogue

One of the most significant advantages of a shamanic image of Jesus surrounds its potential as a point of dialogue with other cultures. Theologians such as Lucian Richards speak of a need for Christological reflection that is less "condescending" in its approach to non-Christian religions.

> It has become apparent to many Christians that the contemporary pluralistic mind must be confronted and that other religious traditions can no longer be viewed in a negative or condescending way... The data from non-Christian religions has become an essential element for theological reflection, which has to grapple with the existence and value of other religions and to account theologically for religious pluralism.[1]

Richards calls for a Christological method that is more "dialogical."

> What is needed is a dialogical approach toward extra-Christian traditions which, while accepting the universal meaning of Jesus, does not approach other religions with a priori claims of exclusivist normality.[2]

Richards articulates the ideas expressed in the Vatican II documents, specifically *Nostra Aetate*, the document which addresses non-Christian religions. The idea that the Church should be "less condescending" in its attitude towards other faiths is put forth in *Nostra Aetate*:

> For all peoples comprise a single community, and have a single origin, since God made the whole race of [humans] dwell over the entire face of the earth...[humans] look to the various religions for

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[1]*What Are They Saying About Christ and World Religions?* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1981), 2.

[2]Ibid., 53.

> answers to those profound mysteries of the human condition which, today even as in olden times, deeply stir the human heart.[3]

In light of the Church's acknowledgement of the wisdom inherent in other religious traditions, a call for dialogue is put forth:

> The Church therefore has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly through *dialogue* and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these [humans], as the values in their society and culture.[4]

Shamanism, as a complex and universal phenomenon, may offer a point of dialogue between other cultures and Jesus Christ. Denise and John Carmody underscore the universality of the shamanic phenomenon.

> Shamanism is so widespread that it cannot be explained by cultural diffusion from a single original center. Eliade's study treats central and northern Asia, and Oceania, central Europe, Tibet, China, and East Asia. Edman's volume *Studies in Shamanism* studies Eskimos, North Americans, Nepalese, people of Kalash-Kaffir, Israelites (on the basis of biblical evidence), Hungarians, and Swedes. Other studies have dealt with Greek and Malay cases. If the definition of shamanism is extended to include divination by trance, we could cite many African instances, including some influenced by devotional Islam (Sufism).[5]

It appears that shamanism, as it as been defined by various researchers, is a universal phenomenon spanning all parts of the globe as well as various religions in one form or an other. Insofar as Jesus parallels this notion of shamanism

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[3]*Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbot (NY: Herder and Herder, 1966.), Sec. 1, Par. 2-3 [brackets added].

[4]Ibid., Sec 2, Par. 5, [emphasis added].

[5]*Ways to the Center*, 3rd edition (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing, 1989), 44.

(which I have established in Chapters two and three), the potential for cross-cultural and religious dialogue may be enormous. Granted that dialogue in such a pluralistic age is a complex and delicate matter, the notion of Jesus as shamanic figure may at least provide a starting point for such dialogue.

Shamanic Image of Jesus and Ecology

The ecological crisis is unique to our historical context. Church leaders and theologians have begun to address this issue. John Paul II referred to this crisis as a moral issue and pointed to the responsibility of everyone to take initiative: "Today the ecological crisis has assumed such proportions as to be the responsibility of everyone... I wish to repeat, the ecological crisis is a moral issue."[6] The National Conference of Catholic Bishops also addressed the crisis calling for a "new ecological ethic which will help shape a future that is both just and sustainable."[7]

Theologians such as Brennan Hill assert that "Christians could be effective voices in the ecological movement if they could better integrate their Christian beliefs with their environmental concerns."[8] Likewise, Christology must also facilitate an ecological consciousness since "in much of Christian theology,

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[6]"And God Saw That It Was Good," Message for World Day of Peace, December 8, 1989. in *Pope Speaks* 35/3 (June 1990): 200-06.

[7]*Economic Justice For All*, in *Origins* 16/24 (November 27, 1986): 409-55.

[8]*Jesus The Christ* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991), 122.

creation has become detached from Christology."[9] Perhaps a shamanic image of Jesus may help since it is a Christological image which (as it is not detached from creation) parallels indigenous notions affirming the sacredness of nature.[10]

Shamanism is often linked to indigenous cultures wherein a "holistic" approach to reality evokes a reverence for the environment. This is primarily because tribal cultures because they are (or have been) dependent on their ecosystem for survival, exhibit a reverence for nature. For example, North American native peoples have historically viewed their land as sacred:

> The perspective of the Indians is naturally rooted in their nature-based origins as oral and agricultural cultures. Divine revelation is found in space, in nature, and in the tribal community that intertwined with that space and living symbiotically with it.[11]

Perhaps shamans, as they draw their power from the spiritual world, are made more powerful because of their awareness that nature is inextricably intertwined with the Divine.

The idea of a Christology which takes into account ecological concerns has become an issue for contemporary theology. For example, William Thompson argues that Jesus' teaching of "self-limitation" (or "metanoia") offers a "new form

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[9]Ibid., 123.

[10]Brennan Hill offers an important methodological insight concerning Christology and ecology: "It would be an anachronism to portray Jesus of Nazareth as an ecologist; our notions about the environment and the severe threats to its survival were not part of Jesus' world...While we should not read our ecological interpretations back into biblical times, we might well begin to reinterpret the gospels for our own needs and apply this 'living Word' to the environmental crises we face today." ibid., 135.

[11]William M. Thompson, *The Jesus Debate* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1985), 423.

of asceticism" which could be applied to ecological concerns.[12] Brennan Hill, while admitting that it would not be appropriate to call Jesus an ecologist, points out how several of Jesus' parables reflect his reverence for nature. For example, Hill refers to Matt. 21:33-43 when Jesus compares the kingdom as a vineyard. For Hill, one level of interpretation regarding this parable addresses ecological concerns insofar as,

> The "vineyard earth" is God's creation and is pure gift, "leased" for stewardship and for mutual sharing. Abuse of this gift through greed and wanton destruction brings death upon others and ultimately upon ourselves.[13]

It is not just the teachings of Jesus that link ecology and Christology but also the teachings *about* Jesus (i.e. ontological claims about his person) which do so. The prologue to John's Gospel places Jesus as the Lord of Creation in that "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being (Jn. 1:3, NRSV)." Pauline Theology echoes this same notion and adds that Jesus holds creation together: "In him all things hold together. (Col. 1:17, NRSV). Moreover, Christ not only brings about the redemption of souls but also the redemption of creation: "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God...We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now (Rom. 8:19, 22, NRSV)." For Paul, Jesus the Christ is linked inextricably with creation from its beginning, holding it together, bringing it towards its redemptive culmination.

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[12]Ibid., 421.

[13]Hill, 136-38.

Hence the image of Jesus as shaman, insofar as shamanism originates in cultures where the Divine is connected with the universe, may help Christians to re-draw from aspects of Christology which link Jesus to the universe. Primarily, that is, as someone who exhibited reverence for the Earth while he walked it and also as the Healer of the universe who "holds all things together," and in which "all creation groans."

A Functionally Inclusive Image

Contemporary Christological reflection has begun to address the issue of inclusiveness specifically in light of feminist concerns. Feminists call for an image of Jesus in which Jesus' maleness is less emphasized: "Christ must be imaged more inclusively than as a single male individual."[14] The more extreme versions of this critique question the ontological identity of Jesus Christ as a male. They reject the notion that a male savior can save women. In light of this critique, a bifurcation occurs between the historical Jesus and the Christ of salvation history. Such criticism has led some feminist theologians to conclude that "Jesus does not liberate people on his own, nor does he reconcile people by himself."[15] As a consequence they call for "gender-free language" preferring "Christ-She" talk to "Christ-He" talk.[16] That is, they prefer to focus on the

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[14]J. B. Clancy, 204.

[15]Pope-Levison and Levison, 153.

[16]Clancy, 205.

"relational" aspects of Jesus incorporating, in one instance, the title Christa.[17]

The issues that feminist theologians address represent very complex and deep problems. Their critiques are lodged at the heart of Christology focusing on the ontological aspects of Jesus' identity as male. Insofar as their critique focuses on these ontological aspects, an easy solution may be long in coming. However, the shamanic image of Jesus focuses on the functional aspect of Jesus' healing ministry providing at least a more "functionally" inclusive image.

That is shamanism, along with being a universal phenomenon, is not gender specific. Cross-culturally it is just as natural for a woman to be a shaman as a man. In the case of Korean shamanism, for example, while "some professional shamans are men, the overwhelming majority are women."[18]

That being the case, the image of Jesus as shaman may provide an image which is functionally more inclusive. This is primarily because the sex of a shaman appears to be relative to a specific culture. As a Christian, it is just as natural for a woman to partake in the healing ministry of Christ as it is for a man. The gender is secondary. Hence, this image may be viewed as "functionally" more inclusive.

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[17]"In using Christa instead of Christ, I am using a term that points away from a sole identification of Christ with Jesus. In combining it with community, I want to shift the focus of salvation away from heroic individuals, male or female," Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart* (NY: Crossroad, 1988), 113; quoted in Pope-Levison and Levison, 165.

[18]Harvey Youngsook Kim, "Possession Sickness and Women Shamans in Korea," in *Unspoken Worlds*, eds. N. Falk and R. Gross, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 42.

Questions Concerning the Image of Jesus as Shaman

There are several questions which have arisen as a result of probing the feasibility of a shamanic image of Jesus in contemporary theology. Some of these questions are concerned with historical congruency while others are concerned with the term "shaman." I will not address these questions at length because I have seriously tried to weave them into the body of my work.

A Shamanic Jesus as New Age?

One of the attitudes that I encountered while researching this topic was that I was dealing with a "new age" topic. This attitude is crystallized in an article by Douglass Groothuis, titled "The Shamanized Jesus."[19] His primary concern is that a shamanic image of Jesus leads to a reduction of his identity as the Son of God.

> First, the New Age esteems Jesus as a spiritually attuned or evolved being...Master, Guru, Yogi, Adept, Avatar, and Shaman. He is a member of the spiritual hall of fame along with Buddha, Krishna, Lao Tse, and others.[20]

Groothuis is concerned with the syncretism that has come about (in some cases) as a result of religious dialogue and comparative religion. However, his conclusion that a shamanic image of Jesus automatically posits adoptionism does not necessarily apply. I tried to illustrate in the latter part of Chapter Three that in the context of Rahner's anthropology it is possible to maintain the unique

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[19]*Christianity Today* 35/5 (April 29, 1991): 20-23.

[20]Ibid, 20.

claims about Jesus Christ while also appreciating the richness of other religions and cultural contexts. Perhaps indigenous tribal healers as they exist universally, are one example of our transcendent humanity open to the ultimate healer in Jesus Christ. Moreover, the term "shaman" is not a new age term, it was coined by anthropologists as a scientific term.

Historical Continuity

Another question concerning the image of Jesus as shaman, surrounds the biblical/historical data. Is there a historical foundation for making this claim about Jesus? My research allowed me to conclude that there was such a foundation. In Chapter Two I referred to the work of Geza Vermes and the first-century Jewish charismatics. The similarity between the charismatics and indigenous healers was striking. According to Vermes Jesus followed in the line of Jewish charismaticism. This enabled me to conclude that although the notion of shamanism was not "explicitly" present in first-century Palestine, the shamanic personality was "implicitly" present. The references to spirit possession in the Hebrew scriptures, as well as the ecstatic characteristics within the Essene communities, strengthens my argument.

Defining Shamanism

The definition of shamanism has had, and continues to have, its limitations and obscurities. By nature of the subject's complexity and its various cultural

formulations, it is difficult to arrive at a single definition. For example, some North American native people reject the term as European. However, researchers must have a way to talk about this phenomenon as the term has been in use within academic circles for at least forty years. Noting the complexity of the problem, I have tried to delineate a broad definition while also focusing on specific characteristics which clearly support my thesis.

Conclusion

The task of this thesis has been to explore the notion of Jesus Christ as a shamanic figure by examining the appropriateness of this image for contemporary Christology.

In order to do this I began by establishing a Christological context following Vatican II. Such a context is affected by a pluralism among theological methods. The rise of Christologies "from below," functional Christologies, correlational approaches, contextual approaches, and inculturation has produced an abundance of Christologies in our time.

The method of correlation seeks to establish sound images of Jesus which are congruent with Christian tradition while simultaneously addressing the specific exigencies of our times. Africans have attempted to inculturate beliefs about Jesus using concepts from their own tribal roles. One example of this is to view Jesus as an African *nganga*. Such an image is congruent with scripture while also addressing the Christological crisis of Africa. I examined this image in more detail

as a foundation for a more universal use of the image of Jesus as shaman.

In Chapter Two I examined the historical evidence for Jesus as shaman. In order to do this I had to first put forth my definition of shamanism. Such a definition allowed me to draw parallels between shamanism and ancient Judaism. Specifically as it exists between a number of prophets in the Hebrew scriptures, the Jewish charismatics around first century Palestine, and in the Synoptic accounts of Jesus.

In the third chapter I drew specific parallels between the Christ-event and certain shamanistic themes of election and initiation. After doing so I suggested placing the notion of Jesus as shaman within the context of Rahner's anthropology and Jung's collective unconscious as a way to preserve Christian claims for the uniqueness of Christ.

Finally in Chapter Four I suggested some advantages for this image in meeting the needs of our times. Specifically, I referred to its potential use for dialogue, ecology, and inclusiveness. With all of this established I then addressed some questions that have been (or may be) raised concerning this image.

My main purpose for this thesis has been to explore the image of Jesus as shaman as a viable image, among many viable images, in contemporary Christology. It was not my purpose to put forth a Christology per se. However, it was not possible to proceed without addressing or "steering" through some critical foundational issues. To do so successfully is to walk the tightrope of contemporary Christological pluralism, a task I believe I have accomplished.

Personal Reflection

The idea for this thesis had its genesis in my desire to unite two realms which are very important to me: Jesus Christ and shamanism. The former has always been significant in my life as I recall an "ecstatic" dream which I had at the age of ten concerning Jesus Christ. He is a reality to me as a human being and a savior-healer. The latter notion came to me while I was an undergraduate student. I read John Sanford's *Healing and Wholeness* (cf. bibliography) which introduced me to the phenomenon of shamanism. I identified personally with this notion especially with the idea of the "wounded healer."

When it was time to decide on a thesis topic this idea came to me during prayer. The bridging of two realities which were both very important to me excited me and so I proceeded.

There is an added advantage to this type of theological reflection. This topic provides a bridge between theological reflection and my own personal spiritual experience. There were times when I became very excited while I was reading Eliade's *Shamanism*. Not only was my brain stimulated but my heart as well. The connections I found were profound to me. The Christological parallels were not only present but also my own personal connections. For example, When I was nineteen and reading Sanford's *Healing and Wholeness*, I was so attracted to the notion of healing that I climbed a tree in a field near my house. I shouted "Yes God, I want to be a shaman!" Imagine my surprise eight years later, while reading Eliade's text, finding out that in some indigenous tribes shamanic

initiation takes place in trees. Moreover, the parallels with Christianity seemed quite natural to me. Christ's final trial took place on a tree--the carpenter was killed on the tree.

These are some of the connections that I made, convincing me that this topic is loaded with personal meaning. This thesis helps bridge for me what Karl Rahner referred to as the "rift," that is "all too common today" between mystical experience and theological reflection.[21]

Shamans are "mystagogues," that is, they lead ("ago" = to lead, Greek) people into the realm of the mystical. Jesus as shaman leads us into the realm of mystery where healing is abundant. It is there that we discover "by his wounds we are healed."

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[21]*Theological Investigations XVI*, (NY: Crossroad, 1983), 72 n.12

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